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The student body of the University of Virginia

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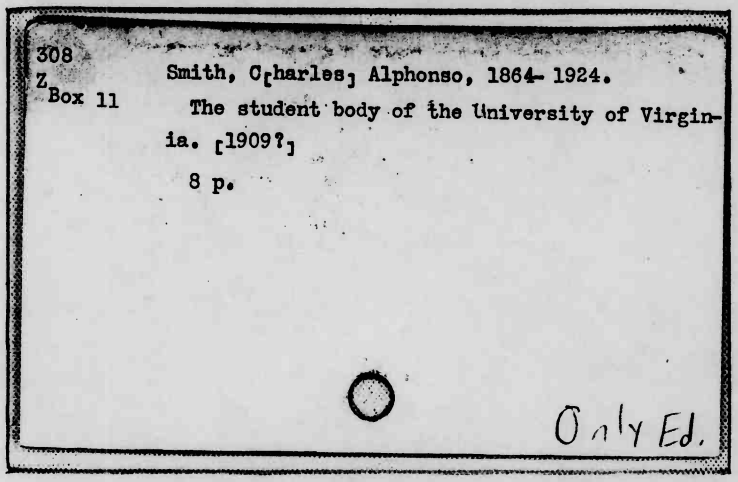


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# The Student Body of the University of Virginia

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# *The Student Body of the University of Virginia*

IT is estimated that twenty thousand students have attended the University of Virginia from the opening of its doors in 1825 to the present time. These twenty thousand men are the real builders of the University. They are also its most effective and its most interesting asset. When I think of the University, when I attempt to visualize its past and its future, it is not the colonnaded beauty of the buildings that looms largest in my thought, though I have never seen a rarer blend of architectural dignity and distinction; it is not that historic first year, when one might have seen Jefferson and Poe greeting each other on the steps of the Rotunda; it is not the Faculty, able and devoted as they have always been. It is this young, eager, unending student-democracy that grips my imagination. The academic world knows the University of Virginia, as it knows every university, chiefly through its President and Faculty; but the man on the street, the world at large, knows it through the students that pass yearly from its halls to embody or to impeach the principles of their *alma mater*.

Every community of co-workers develops sooner or later a community spirit, a collective individuality. The French call it *esprit de corps*, but in the case of the University of Virginia I prefer the phrase of Ulrich von Hutten. He called it the "Gemeingeist unter freien

Geistern," that equal temper of liberal minds which freedom and responsibility alone can quicken into life and which, when formed, is the most potent influence that a university can release. The "Gemeingeist" is very strong at the University of Virginia, so strong that however little a student may learn from the established courses of study, he will learn much or at least absorb much from the constant teaching of the "Gemeingeist." It is hard to analyze this communal spirit but when the University of Virginia man looks back on his college years he will agree with me, I think, that four elements stand out preëminent.

The first is courtesy, a courtesy born of freedom, self-respect (not self-esteem), and an unbroken democratic tradition. Wherever you find a University of Virginia man you are pretty apt to find a man who either brought a fine-flavored courtesy with him to the University or imbibed it unconsciously from the "Gemeingeist." It is a courtesy not merely of form but of spirit, and it is as evident on the street or street car as it is in the ballroom or lecture hall. Students show it to one another as well as to their professors or to the casual visitors who come upon the lawn. It is the tradition of the place.

The utter absence of hazing is in part a cause and in part an expression of the spirit of courtesy. It is not true that first year men are severely or repellently let alone at the University. "The only way a first year man can queer himself," says a prominent student, "is by being fresh." The best thing for such a man is not to be maltreated but to be let alone till he finds himself. He will find himself and thus orient himself much more expeditiously by passing through this period of social probation



than by being either hazed or embraced. Courtesy lies between hitting and hugging. The University does neither; and the new man is usually the first to recognize in after years both the justice and the helpfulness of this medial attitude.

The devoted efforts that the students are now making to erect a monument to Poe's mother is, I think, a beautiful example of a sort of knightly courtesy that is none too common in these days. A student discovered a few years ago that the mother of the poet lay buried in the pauper section of old St. John's in Richmond. Her burial place had strangely escaped the scrutiny of Poe's biographers, but there is no doubt now about the identification of the place. She died at the age of twenty-four with three little children, all to be dependent on charity, crying around her bedside. As soon as the grave was found, a concerted effort was organized chiefly by the finder and the Raven Society to redeem the neglect of the past and to perpetuate the memory of Elizabeth Arnold Poe by a worthy monument. It was not the love of literature that prompted this action; it was something finer: it was courtesy, an ingrained, instinctive, and inspiring courtesy. I don't wonder that the great sculptor, Paul Wayland Bartlett, said: "This is the most beautiful project which has ever been brought to me."

Another characteristic trait of the student body is responsiveness. Every teacher knows what it means to talk to unresponsive men. Well, these men are not unresponsive. I am speaking, of course, from my own experience and observation here, which extend over only six years; but I have never known a student body more quickly or

more coöperatively responsive to the appeal of reason than the student body of the University of Virginia. Go to them with a proposition that has sense in it, appeal to their loyalty or to their honor or to their moral or intellectual stewardship and you may count on a generous and coöperant response.

I like to think that in 1858, when the Y. M. C. A. was only an experiment and was being tentatively tried out in only a few large cities in England and America, the students of the University of Virginia were the first to sense the student possibilities of the new movement and thus the first to found a student Y. M. C. A. Later in the same year an association was organized at the University of Michigan, and in 1877 the movement had grown to such dimensions that an intercollegiate Y. M. C. A. was formed. But it was at the University of Virginia that the first student Y. M. C. A. in the world was definitely organized. I see in this not an evidence of superior spirituality, but an index to the alertness and responsiveness of the student "Gemeingeist." It is worth while to remember, too, that since 1858 the Y. M. C. A. has enrolled considerably more than one half of the students, and that the six hundred now enrolled constitute a larger percentage of the entire student body than any other state university can show. I need hardly refer to those epic years from 1861 to 1865. Every phase of the great struggle had been wrought out in student debate before it was fought out in battle. When the call came, two thousand five hundred students and alumni responded, five becoming members of the Confederate Congress.

There is at the University very little of the provincial-



ism that comes from isolation, and isolation is usually the parent of provincialism. The larger currents flow freely and widely here, because the student interests are multiple and diverse. Of the students at the University last year fifty-three per cent. came from Virginia, while the remaining forty-seven per cent. came from thirty-nine states and three foreign countries. Let one observe the subjects debated in the Literary Societies, the articles written for the *University Magazine*, the attendance on lectures given by representative speakers, the wide-reaching neighborhood work of the Y. M. C. A., the activity of the Civic Club, the Cosmopolitan Club, and other student organizations, and then draw his own conclusions. Responsiveness is not a purely intellectual trait; it is also temperamental. It may be measured in part by the relative number of interests represented. Each interest is a window out of which a university looks, and through which it hears the voices of challenge and appeal. No spot in the South has been so quick to catch or to reflect the larger movements of the time as the lawn of the University of Virginia.

The third characteristic of the "Gemeingeist," a high sense of honor, needs but a bare mention. "Who is there in the United States," said recently Professor A. C. Coolidge, of Harvard, author of *The United States as a World Power*, "who knows of the University of Virginia and does not think of her as the home of the Honor System, the priceless possession of which others may well be envious? To you it seems as natural as the air you breathe. To those less fortunate in this respect, it remains, even if difficult conditions make it difficult of

attainment, an ideal, an encouragement toward a better state of things." The honor system is not so much a system as a state of mind. In its actual working out it may be defined as such an organization of student opinion as tends not only to detect cheating and lying but to make every student ashamed to cheat or to lie.

The honor system concerns itself not only with examinations but with drinking, gambling, pledges made to the Faculty, contests for honors in the Literary Societies—with nearly every student relationship into which lying or cheating may enter. The large increase of students in the last few years has not had the effect of lowering the honor standards; it has increased the vigilance of the honor committee and the effectiveness of the committee's work. It is now settled, for example, that the student who touches alcoholic drink after 12:00 o'clock in the day cannot attend a dance given that night even though the "bory" of the fraternity giving the dance may have granted him permission to drink. The principle is that while the management of the dance lies with the "bory" and his fraternity, the honor system concerns the welfare of the entire University and cannot, therefore, be annulled or modified in the slightest degree by an individual or a fraternity. It has been decided also that a pledge made to the Dean not to drink while at the University includes the time between sessions as well as the time spent on University grounds. The ideal of the honor system was well expressed by Emerson in those great lines about Rome:

*"And ever in the strife of your own thoughts*
*Obey the nobler impulse; that is Rome."*



The fourth characteristic note in student life at the University is the moral note. Dr. David M. R. Culbreth, in his entertaining and informing book on *The University of Virginia, Memories of her Student Life and Professors*, says rightly that there are three kinds of men who ought not to go to the University. First, those who wish the credit of a college education "without hard mental work"; second, those who are known to be "incorrigible and defiant"; third, those who wish to go through college "just for the name or éclat it might bestow." These are all in the last analysis moral disqualifications, but I wish to say a word about the second class. The incorrigible and defiant man, if he comes to the University, does not stay long. The "Gemeingeist" does not welcome him and does not make him feel at home, because the ideal of the University is to educe the man not by rules and regulations applied from without, but by principles and standards nourished from within. The incorrigible man, the man who cannot be reached from within, gradually finds himself in an inhospitable atmosphere.

There is only one morality but there are two highways along which colleges and universities seek it. The one is thus commended by Woodrow Wilson: "What a man ought never to forget with regard to a college is that it is a nursery of principle and of honor." The other is thus condemned by the Dean of the University of Illinois: "The greatest handicap in my experience to successful college discipline is the excessive number of rules laid down by the colleges for the conduct of students." The University of Virginia has from the beginning adopted

the first method and has been justified by the results. The moral life here may not be as showy or as subject to appraisement by statistics as at some other institutions, because it does not express itself in compulsory conformities; but it is none the less deep and genuine. The last fifteen years, moreover, have witnessed a growth in moral conduct and a heightening of moral ideals as unmistakable to the returning alumnus as to the older members of the Faculty. The positive influences making for right living vastly outweigh the negative or reactionary influences. If a man goes downward instead of upward at the University of Virginia, it is not because of the atmosphere that encompasses him but in spite of it. There has never been a time when the undertow was less menacing or when the great tidal waves moved shoreward with so ample a volume or so lifting a power.

C. ALPHONSO SMITH.

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